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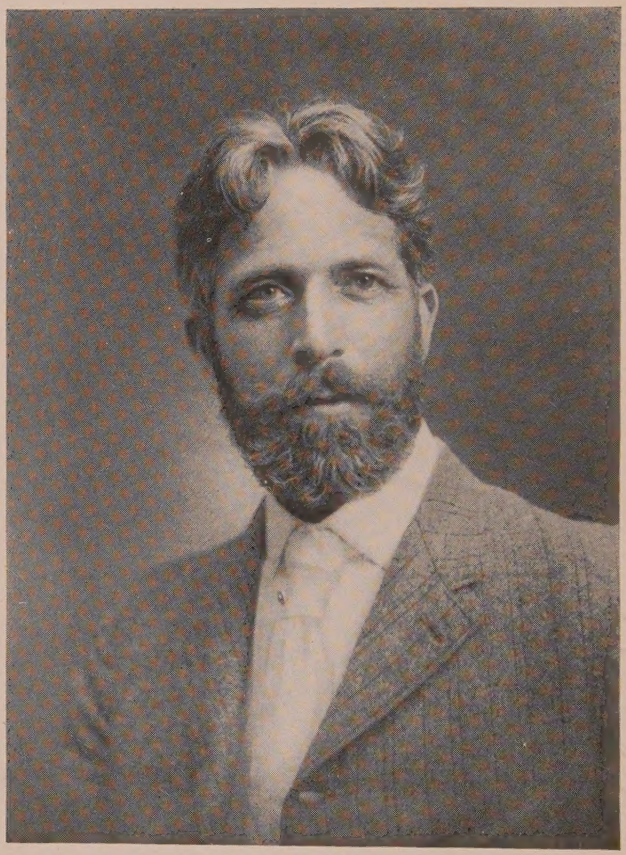


Be ye Thankful

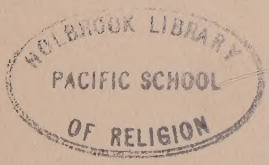
A Sermon by

Rev. George B. Flatch

Thanksgiving Day

Ware, Massachusetts

1906



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THE REASONABLE SERVICE OF THANKFULNESS.

"BE YE THANKFUL," writes St. Paul to the Colossians; and "be ye thankful," not occasionally and exceptionally, but habitually, steadily.

The reasons for Thankfulness are more than numerous; they are numberless.

I shall speak now of two main reasons why Thankfulness should be in our hearts and Thanksgiving on our lips, not only to-day, but constantly :— I, Because we are men and therefore God is mindful of us; II, Because men are coming to recognize and value manhood as beyond price, and therefore the kingdom of God is making head.

I. The fact that we are men, of whom God is ever mindful, carries many suggestions of thankfulness.

1. In the first place, let us be thankful that we live by bread and that we have bread by which to live, but let us be even more thankful that being men we cannot live by bread alone.

The year has had its harvests. The land is full of corn and fruit. The seed entrusted to the soil in

the days of the springtime has yielded its thirty, sixty, a hundred fold. God has given us our daily bread. Back of the loaf is the flour, and back of the flour is the grain, and back of the grain are the care, the power, the generosity of God, and every loaf we eat is the gift of Him whose is the rain and the sunshine and the "sweet influences of the Pleiades."

And it is good indeed to eat bread! I am thankful that God made us in such a way that we enjoy the eating of bread, and I am also thankful that He made good cooks. It is sometimes imagined that God does not wish us to have good times and to enjoy the good things of life; but if this is so, what is the reason that He made roast turkey so savory? and if He did not intend that a healthy boy should enjoy eating plum pudding, why did He teach mothers how to make it? You will find this, as a matter of fact:—that good cooking goes along with good Christianity, and that the best things to eat are to be had in those countries where Jesus has the greatest influence. It is not without significance that the risen Christ cooked a morning meal for his disciples on the shore of the lake, and invited them to come and break their fast.

There is, in fact, nothing more certain than that God wishes everybody to be well fed. What wide plains, deep with fertility, made ready for the generous wheat; what lands and zones, adapted to the olive, the vine, the nut, the fig, the orange, the

apple, and the countless other fruits, and luxuriant with their luscious growth; what treasure of the sea, and what overflowing bounty of the earth:—bear witness to this wish of God that all His children may have bread enough and to spare! Nor is it bread for the body alone that He makes the good earth give. For the earth produces whatever may feed the hungering sensibilities of the soul. Here is beauty; here is bird-song; the very pasture-bars, as they clatter down at nightfall, make music; the sun in his setting paints a new glory in the sky on each successive night; and the summer hay-fields are fragrant as with ripened hope. Here also are the thoughts of amply gifted men and women; here is knowledge, inherited from the past, drawn from coolest wells; here is social opportunity, where every one may meet his kind; here are the joys and the rewards of endeavor and of achievement. In the will of God the good old earth thus brings forth every manner of "bread" that human beings hunger for, and if men, in handling God's earthly bounty, were as good as He is in giving it, no human being would suffer any sort of hunger that "bread" can feed.

"Be ye thankful" for Bread;—for the plentifulness of it, for the pleasure of it, for the goodness of God and of his earth in giving it.

But man cannot live by bread alone. After every hunger which bread can feed is satisfied, we are hungry still. The sheep in the pasture feed

themselves full, and lie down content. They need no more. But the shepherd has longings; and while his sheep lie by the still waters, entirely satisfied, his soul wanders eagerly through realms of the unknown, in search of a contentment which no earthly bread can furnish him. How much greater a man is than a sheep!

Only intercourse with Jehovah can feed the hunger of a man, and cause him to rest as the sheep do beside the still waters. A man is too great to be satisfied by any food but the bread of God which cometh down from heaven.

"Be ye thankful" for this. "Be ye thankful" that, no matter how bountiful your crops may be, no matter how richly spread your table may be, no matter how full of wisdom and knowledge and of the beauty of music and art your life may be, no matter how much of the good earth's bounty may fall to your share,—you are too great a being in your nature and capability to be satisfied thus. "Be ye thankful" that God made you after so full and splendid a pattern that nothing less than He Himself and His Fulness is sufficient to fill your soul to perfect satisfaction.

2. In the second place, therefore, let us be thankful for life in the body, but let us be even more thankful that, being men, we are not "living bodies," but that God made us "living souls."

Life in the body is very beautiful,—at least until

the body begins to wear out. The body has countless capabilities of enjoyment, numberless avenues along which pleasure comes singing home, bringing fragrant flowers. What joys the eye transmits; what delight is in the sounds which the ear may catch—voices of nature, voices of loved ones, voices of the daughters of music; what pleasure and profit in the ability to go from place to place, to climb mountains, to run and not be weary, to work with strength, to use the body as the skilled and quick servant of the soul's behests.

"Be ye thankful" for the body, and for physical life with all its joys. "Be ye thankful" for the dainty infant form, with which Christ comes to whomsoever receiveth one such priceless gift in His name. "Be ye thankful" for the eye, for the hand (that perfect implement), for the hearing of the ear, for every organ and member and nerve by means of which you have your contact with this wonderful physical universe and are enabled to take to yourself the benedictions of labor and of love. It is "very good."

Nevertheless, a man is not a living body, he is a living soul. The characteristic fact about a human being is that he is not a physical, but a spiritual being. God breathed into his body the breath of life, and he thereby ceased to be a body and became a soul. Of no other creature on earth is this true. All other creatures come up from the earth, and are of

the earth, and nothing more. But, while man's body also comes up from the earth, and is of the earth, God did something more for man than He did for any other creature. He breathed into him the breath of divine life, and made him a spiritual being, a "living soul." And this is what each human being is. Man, like God, is a spirit. He is not a body, in which, somewhere concealed, is a soul; he is a soul, and his body is his temporary covering and implement, during the short period of his earthly life. Your body is no more you, than the clothes which cover your body are you. You are a living soul. You are a spirit. The form and shape of your body are derived from the form and shape of your soul, just as the form of the glove which covers the hand is derived from the form of the hand. As living souls, as spirits, each one of us, in real being, is formed and builded out of spiritual substance, and if we could see ourselves spiritually, we should see that our spirits, our souls, are in the form and stature of men and women, and that our bodies fit us as the glove fits the hand.

"Be ye thankful" for this. "Be ye thankful" that, in real being, ye are not mere earthly and physical bodies, in which somewhere is lodged a something called a soul—a ghostly thing, without shape or substance; but that, in real being, ye are "living souls," full-shaped in the image of God, builded of heavenly substance, having the full human form, endowed with powers and possibilities of which

you little dream. "Be ye thankful" that ye breathe the breath of life, and that ye are formed for the heavenly world, and that with the decay of the outward man (the body) the inward man (your real self) is renewed day by day, and that God made you thus and not as the beasts of the field.

3. In the third place, therefore, let us be thankful for this earthly existence, but also and more let us be thankful that, because we are men, this earthly existence soon ends, and we finish our destiny in another world.

This earthly existence is good. God made it good. The days of boyhood and girlhood are good. It is good to marry and to be given in marriage. It is good to build a home and to make room and welcome in it for the little ones whom God may send. It is good to see one's sons and daughters grow to strength and take on themselves the responsibilities of maturity. It is good to have a part and to bear a hand in the world's affairs,—to be a wheel, a cog, a pin, or only an atom, in the great machine. It is good to be Livingstone and Stanley, and to open a dark continent to the light of day. It is good to be Morse and Marconi, and to bind continents together by the invisible ties of electric intercourse. It is good to be Shakspeare and Browning, Raphael and Wagner, Luther and Wesley, and to contribute to the enlightenment, the enjoyment, the salvation, of the world. It is good to be a Colonel Waring, and

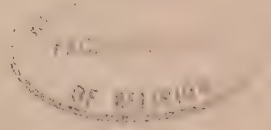
to drive yellow fever out of Havana. It is good to be a statesman among politicians, and by the reputation of a great integrity, to be seated in a presidential chair by the acclamation of unprecedented majorities. It is good to play one's own small part, and to contribute one's own small share, and to be faithful to one's own inconspicuous duty, and to take one's own measure of reward and pain,—in the sum total of all that is done and said and suffered here.

But after a time, this earthly existence ceases to be good. It wears out. Life, which seems inexhaustibly interesting to the young, serves its use, and then begins to be less and less interesting, and no doom could be more dreadful than that of being compelled to live on and on endlessly, here in the earth.

"Be ye thankful" for the privilege of the years here in the earth. "Be ye thankful" for the part you may play, and for the work you may do, and for the success you may achieve, and for the pleasure you may enjoy, and for the knowledge you may gain, and for the cups of cold water you may give, while you live this earthly existence. But be ye even more thankful that the earthly existence is limited, that it is short, that it comes quickly to an end, and that you go at once into a better world. "Be ye thankful" for the blessing of present life, but be ye even more thankful for the far greater blessing of an approaching death.

For being men, we need to "die. If we did not "die," we could not "live." If the insect in the chrysalis could not burst its way through the enveloping walls that close it in, it could not live. But it bursts its way through, emerges into the sunshine, and spreads its wings in the freedom and joy of a new world. If we who are spirits could not break our way through the barriers of these material walls which hold us within this present existence, we could never realize the hopes and aspirations which are the best part of our endowment. But the barrier grows thin, the bonds which bind us here grow slack, and the time comes when we are able to break our way out of the body, and to emerge, new creatures, into a new world.

We are meant, all the time, for the other world. Being "living souls," we shall never be where we really belong until we come into the country of "living souls," the spiritual world, the splendid home of God. It is in that country that we shall find the realization of our hopes, and satisfaction for the longings which so disturb us now. And it is in the goodness and mercy of God that He makes our earthly days short and few, that we may sooner begin really to live. If we saw things as they are, we would give God thanks every day because the end of our earthly existence draws steadily nearer, and, while abating nothing of our joy and vigor in the present life, we would anticipate the end with delight, and



every funeral would be a joyous feast, as celebrating the release of a living soul into liberty and the delight of unbound wings.

"Be ye thankful" that some of those you love have already had the blessing of death; and "be ye thankful" that the same blessing is to be experienced by you in no long time hence.

4. And so, in the fourth place, let us be thankful for the joys and pleasures of the present life, but, being men, let us be even more thankful for its disappointments, its tribulations and its pains.

A sheep in the pasture has no disappointments, suffers no griefs, is put to no proof by manifold tribulations, and neither would such experiences be yours, if you were an animal, instead of a "living soul."

It is because we are living souls, whom no bread but that of God can satisfy, whom no country but the heavenly can furnish with the fulness of joy,—it is because of this that we are subject and sensitive to grief and pain and toil. It is the chafing of our souls against their prison walls, it is the effort of our cabined spirits to break forth into freedom, it is the premonition of the time to come when our aspirations will be wingbound no longer but will take their full flight into the boundlessness of God,—it is this which is the cause of our sorrows. If we had no hopes, we would have no heart-sickness because of hope deferred. If we had no aspirations, we would suffer no

disappointments. If we had no affections, we should endure no griefs. If we were not "living souls," cabined and confined in temporary bodies and kept in a material universe which cannot furnish us with all we need, we should have no more tribulations than a sheep has in a fat pasture.

"Be ye thankful" for the pleasant things of your lives; but after you have counted them and noted their large number, then turn about, and, with all the gratitude of your being, give thanks for sorrow, for grief, for disappointment, for the tragedy of your attempted existence in this kind of world. "Be ye thankful" that you cannot comfortably live here. "Be ye thankful" that you are a being to whom existence in this body and in this world is necessarily a discipline, a confinement, a means of sorrow. "Be ye thankful" that you are not a sheep, but a "living soul."

These are some of the reasons and causes for thankfulness and thanksgiving which most appeal to Christian thought. They ought to stir our deepest emotions, and re-kindle within us the steady fires of loyalty and devotion to the God who is so wise and kind. How good He is to have made us the beings that we are and to have undertaken to prepare us in these few earthly years for that timeless living which He Himself enjoys! How absurd we are in our complainings, and how dull we are in that we have turned our best things into sorrows! We decorate

marriage in gaiety, and drape death in blackest woe; whereas, in truth, nothing is more tragic or has more possibilities of disaster than marriage, while nothing is more kindly than death. We call pleasure sweet and grief bitter, whereas the sweetness of pleasure commonly turns to gall in the full draught of it, while the bitterness of grief often is transformed into a divine sweetness on which the heart feeds and comforts itself until the day shall dawn. "Be ye thankful," that ye are men. Thankfulness is the beginning of wisdom, and is safe.

II. Turning now to the second main cause for Thankfulness and Thanksgiving, namely, the fact that the pricelessness of man is becoming more and more recognized, and therefore that the kingdom of God is making head in the world, I shall content myself and you with the barest references to so great a theme.

The world has always valued Things. Hence, its cruelty, its injustice, its wars, its excesses, its sins and their sad penalties.

But when Christ came into the world, He placed a valuation upon Men, as infinitely superior to Things,—and slow, against the dead set of the world's current, this thought of Christ has been forcing its way to authority and power.

We have been passing through a period in this country during which the glamour of Things has been deceiving the very elect. Men and men and

men have been ground up in heavy mills, that with their souls and bodies thus ground up, cemented with the blood and sorrows of women and children, the powers that be might build for themselves thrones, palaces, fortunes, dizzy self-exaltations, and might revel in the abundance and superabundance of Things Possessed.

Those mills still grind, but there has come a change. Our country is rubbing open its eyes to see that manhood is worth incomparably more than millionairehood, and that the mad and exclusive chase after Things converts the chaser himself or herself into a Thing. The whole country is roused and rousing against the fool who says in his heart, There is no god but Gold. Not long ago the country nearly elected a man to the Presidency, simply because, in his young enthusiasm and insight into reality, he had dared to shout out, "You shall not crucify manhood on your cross of gold." The rising generation is doing what President Tucker said,—it is looking at the specimens which are labelled "Millionaire," and is saying, "We don't want to become Things, like that."

In other words, he is insensitive to the signs of change in the weather, who does not perceive that, although the wind-vane is tossed back and forth by conflicting air-currents, yet is it slowly quivering around to point steadily toward Character, and no longer toward Things, as of main importance to Men.

This means, the coming of a more righteous Commerce, a purer Politics, a sweeter and saner Religion, a more even-handed Justice, a lessening of Vice, an uplifting of the average Comfort and Intelligence, the spread of Fellowship,—a healthier, wholesomer, happier people everywhere. And these are nigh us, even at our doors. Our whole country, nay, the whole world, is making a huge stride upward toward Democracy. There is a story that a schoolboy was asked the meaning of the Latin motto on the State Seal of Virginia, "Sic semper tyrannis." The seal shows a man prostrate, with his neck under the heel of another man,—and—"thus always to tyrants," the motto. The boy knew no Latin, but had eyes. Taking in the pictured situation, he said he reckoned the motto, "Sic semper tyrannis" meant, "Take your foot off my neck." From the land of cotton and of corn, from the centers of manufacture and of trade, from earth's wide bound and ocean's farthest coast, men are saying, and meaning it, to every form and sort of oppression, "Take your foot off my neck." The day never was when Democracy was so near coming to its own, and when "Charlie over the water" was so likely to be invited never to return.

Wherefore, "be ye thankful!" The advent of Democracy means the triumph of Man, the defeat of Things. It means the exaltation of character, the under-valuing of mere clothes. Thackeray once drew

a picture of George the King:—very stately and imposing, in flowing wig, magnificent robes, high-heeled boots,—spangles, buckles, gilt, ribbons,—the whole show. Side by that, he drew another picture of The King:—just the clothes, in their imposing magnificence, standing up empty. And next alongside, he drew George himself:—a bald, weazened, spindling, crook-shanked insignificance, whom no one would be poor enough much to reverence. The world has been ruled quite long enough by a small George made imposing by magnificent clothes. The demand is being made everywhere that a man shall submit to the test of overalls and jumper, and then if he seem kingly, let him bear rule, otherwise, despite pedigree or inheritance, let him take his place where he belongs.

I rejoice therefore in the day which is already here, and I hail the day whose next dawning requires no prophet to anticipate. "Hail to the coming singers! Hail to the brave light-bringers! For out of the shadows of night, The world rolls into Light!"

"Be ye thankful," brothers, for God fulfils Himself in many ways, and has a thousand workmen who do not wear our livery. "Be ye thankful,"—inasmuch as every schism in that which has been established, every heresy in that which has been decided by Ecumenical Council, but enlarges the bounds of the Kingdom of God on earth, and ultimately enriches all mankind with a fuller, sweeter Faith.

"Be ye thankful,"—because, being men, nothing but manhood, and that after the type and quality of Him who is the perfect flower of Manhood, will ever be unchallenged or reverenced by us, and because this manhood is and shall be judged and approved, not by professions, not by things possessed, but by deeds of worth and truth. "Be ye thankful," too, that ye yourselves have a part to fill, a task to do, a daily chance to practice the law of love toward God and of love toward man, and that whoever does this on earth need have no fear of missing the gates of Heaven. And "be ye thankful," last of all,—that the bugles in the van of Christ's army never blow the signal for retreat,—that every inch of ground won is won for good,—that the gains of which I have spoken are permanent gains,—that there is no going back,—that history does not, except in the merest superficial sense, ever repeat itself,—that though the Christ-idea advances slowly as against the opposing momentum of ages, yet it advances steadily, world-widely, and by a thousand ways,—and that not one deed or thought or prayer of yours, contributed in the spirit of love and in the hope of helping God accomplish his holy task here in the earth, shall fall to the ground unnoticed, unfulfilled.

"Be ye thankful," brothers,—to-day; and every day. There is abundant cause.

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